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FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8568
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000047

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/13/2029
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SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S HEAD OF POLICE TALKS REFORM

Classified By:
AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a December 30 introductory meeting with the Ambassador, Maj Gen Alik Sargsian, Chief of the Republic of Armenia Police, expressed a strong wish for reform within the police system and an interest in further cooperation with the USG. His ideas for reform, however, centered mainly on improved training, organization, compensation and prestige for police forces, and played down the need to punish officers guilty of abuses or to keep law enforcement politically neutral. End Summary.

WE'VE GOT PROBLEMS

2. (C) The Ambassador paid an introductory call on the Armenian national Police commander (Armenia's Minister of Internal Affairs-equivalent), Major General Alik Sargsian, December 30. A career police officer, Sargsian came up through the ranks, and then doffed his police uniform for eight years to serve as appointed governor of Ararat Region, before his May 2008 appointment to his current job.

3. (C) Sargsian was quick to admit that the Armenian police have a number of fundamental weaknesses, and he cited skill at maintaining public order as the first of these. The violent events of March 1 and 2, he said showed that the police were "not ready" to deal successfully with large demonstrations. He also lamented the lack of modern crime-fighting and crime-solving techniques. He admitted an endemic corruption problem, which he blamed largely on the low salaries. His most heartfelt comments were on the need for both improved performance and improved public relations as a way of boosting the image and dignity of the police force, which he acknowledged is respected by neither the people nor the rest of the government.

THE U.S. AS A MODEL AND A PARTNER

4. (C) Sargsian professed deep admiration for American society, government and law enforcement. He said he hopes to increase cooperation with the USG, and at the Ambassador's suggestion said he would have one of his deputies create a list of specific fields in which his service would like to expand cooperation with U.S. counterparts.

LOTS OF CARROT, LITTLE STICK

5. (C) For all his candor in cataloging police shortcomings, Sargsian steered clear of acknowledging the improper actions and omissions of the police in politically sensitive cases, and he did not prescribe any particularly bitter medicine for the ills of law enforcement. His comments regarding the March 1 crackdown on opposition protesters seemed to focus on his forces' technical ability to deal with public order situations rather than the justification for use of force in the first place or culpability in any of the ten deaths that resulted. He seemed to suggest that the solution for this and other gaps

in police effectiveness was more modern equipment and tactical techniques rather than a systemic change in attitudes or practices. He also made no mention of police inaction or ineffectiveness in the face of election violations or attacks on journalists and human rights activists. He claimed the police had already made great strides against corruption in the last couple of years, and would show even more progress soon, largely thanks to President Sargsian's (no relation to the police chief) decision to raise police salaries 50 percent by 2010. But he did not mention plans to actively investigate and prosecute corrupt officials throughout the police ranks. He did say he was trying to bring openness to the police force and to dispel the Soviet-era legacy of police secretiveness and public distrust. To that end the police has created 40-person public advisory committee housed next to police headquarters.

TIRED OF BEING THE "SCAPEGOAT"

16. (C) He seemed most passionate when discussing the need to improve public trust in and respect for the police, as well as the standard of living of police personnel. He said much of this improvement would depend on the police doing a better, more transparent and less corrupt job, but he also looked to improved pay as a key factor and bemoaned the tendency for police to be made the "scapegoat" in political disputes. The Ambassador noted that this would only be possible only when the police force was perceived - by government and opposition alike - as an independent, professional organization that treated all equally before the law.

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COMMENT

17. (C) Sargsian's points about shortcomings in technical areas such as equipment and training and about low salaries contributing to poor morale and corruption are all quite valid. There is also considerable truth to his implication that the police are forced to take much of the heat for higher-level political decisions that undermine democracy and human rights. Moreover, opposition insiders have confided to us in the past that they consider Alik Sargsian personally to be a relatively clean and professional officer, who will carry out his political instructions but does not personally share the regime's anti-opposition agenda. Nevertheless, the Armenian public justifiably perceives the police apparatus to be a willing participant in a system that routinely exercises state power to partisan ends, with the top police echelons sharing in the spoils of that system. On corruption, the Embassy's Armenian contacts have seen some progress in limiting lower-level abuses such as traffic shakedowns, but there is no consensus that anti-corruption efforts are building steam or that they are tackling malfeasance by senior officials. End comment.

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